



Current account woes

Proper structural reforms are needed to boost exports, reduce dependence on imported oil

The latest trade figures published by the Reserve Bank of India confirm the damage caused by high global oil prices in the last few months. India's current account deficit (CAD) widened to 2.9% of gross domestic product (GDP) in the July-September quarter, a four-year high, under increasing pressure from the oil bill. This is in contrast to the same quarter a year ago when the CAD was only 1.1% of GDP. The widening of the CAD was due to an increase in the trade deficit, which jumped to \$50 billion in the September quarter as compared to \$32.5 billion a year ago, due to a higher import bill. The government, however, may not be too worried about the widening CAD figures as the major factor that was behind the phenomenon has abated; global oil prices have dropped sharply since early October. Brent crude is down almost 30% from the high it reached in early October. So the size of the deficit is likely to come down in the quarter ending December. This is not to suggest that all is fine. As usual, medium to long-term risks to the external sector remain. For one, there is the threat of price volatility faced by heavy importers of oil. Unless India manages to diversify its energy base by tapping into local sources of energy, this will remain a perennial threat to economic stability.

A widening current account deficit *per se* should not be a cause for worry as long as foreign capital inflows into the economy are brisk enough to fund its huge import needs. The trouble arises when foreign inflows dry up and restrict the ability to purchase essential imports. So as liquidity conditions continue to tighten across the world, India's heavy import dependence is a cause for concern. Meanwhile, when Western central banks tighten their monetary policy, the RBI will be forced to tighten its own policy stance in order to retain investment capital and defend the rupee. This will impact domestic economic growth negatively. Each time the external account has come under pressure, the government has simply tried to bring in piecemeal emergency measures, such as a little opening up of the capital account or ill-advised restrictions on imports. Such a policy obviously manages to only kick the can down the road rather than bring a permanent solution to the problem. In order to bring about any meaningful change, the government should also try implementing proper structural reforms that can boost exports, thus helping fund imports through means other than capital inflows, and end the over-reliance on imported oil.

Death in the air

It is time clean air is made a front-line political issue

As an environmental scourge that killed an estimated 1.24 million people in India in 2017, air pollution should be among the highest policy priorities. But the Centre and State governments have tended to treat it as a chronic malaise that defies a solution. The deadly results of official apathy are outlined in the *Global Burden of Disease 2017* report on the impact of air pollution on deaths, disease burden, and life expectancy across the states of India, published by *The Lancet*. Millions of people are forced to lead morbid lives or face premature death due to bad air quality. India's national standard for ambient fine particulate matter, or PM_{2.5}, is notoriously lax at 40 micrograms per cubic metre, but even so, 77% of the population was exposed to higher levels on average. No State met the annual average exposure norm for PM_{2.5} of 10 micrograms per cubic metre set by the World Health Organisation. If the country paid greater attention to ambient air quality and household air pollution, the researchers say, people living in the worst-affected States of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Jharkhand could add more than 1.7 years to their life expectancy. Similar gains would accrue nationwide, but it is regions with low social development, reflected partly in reliance on solid fuels for cooking, and those with ambient air pollution caused by stubble-burning, construction dust and unbridled motorisation such as Delhi that would benefit the most.

Sustainable solutions must be found for stubble-burning and the use of solid fuels in households, the two major sources of pollution, and State governments must be made accountable for this. The Centre should work with Punjab and Haryana to ensure that the machinery already distributed to farmers and cooperatives to handle agricultural waste is in place and working. A mechanism for rapid collection of farm residues has to be instituted. In fact, new approaches to recovering value from biomass could be the way forward. The proposal from a furniture-maker to convert straw into useful products will be keenly watched for its outcomes. A shift away from solid fuels to LPG in millions of low-income homes has provided health benefits, *The Lancet* study says, underscoring the value of clean alternatives. The potential of domestic biogas units, solar cookers and improved biomass cookstoves has to be explored, since they impose no additional expenditure on rural and less affluent households. Such measures should, of course, be complemented by strong control over urban sources of pollution. India's commitments under the Paris Agreement on climate change require a sharp reduction in particulates from fossil fuel. Fuels may be relatively cleaner today and vehicles better engineered to cut emissions, but traffic densities in cities have led to a rise in pollution. Real-time measurement of pollution is also lacking. There are not enough ground-level monitoring stations for PM_{2.5}, and studies primarily use satellite imagery and modelling to project health impacts. Rapid progress on clean air now depends on citizens making it a front-line political issue.

Delhi and Paris: A tale of two cities

Stirring reminders of the distance travelled and challenges ahead in securing human rights



GOPALKRISHNA GANDHI

Paris flared – Paris, which the divine sun had sown with light, and where in glory waved the great future harvest of Truth and of Justice.

Émile Zola, Paris

I asked my soul: What is Delhi? She replied: The world is the body and Delhi its life

Mirza Ghalib

Exactly 70 years ago, on December 10, 1948, the UN General Assembly met in Paris. Delegates from the world's many ends met at the hilltop Palais de Chaillot and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The text had been propelled by Eleanor Roosevelt as chair of the drafting committee, and honed by some of the finest minds, scholars, legal and political idealists, visionaries. Selected by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to represent India in the drafting exercise, Hansa Mehta from Gujarat brought to the exercise her own distinctive feminism. Seeing the draft Article 1, "All men are born free and equal in dignity and rights," Hansaben intervened to say the times had changed and the line should read, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Roosevelt applauded and embraced the amendment.

Human beings

In the post-Hitler, post-Hiroshima world that phrase meant more than any two could. The delegates to the Assembly nourished visions of a global transformation. But, given that of the 58 member-nations, as many as 10 including the Soviet Union, South Africa and Saudi Arabia abstained or did not vote, the delegates must have understood that a document as idealistic as theirs would run into conceptual difficulties and be

chronically short in application.

But they could not have imagined that on the Declaration's 70th anniversary, Paris, the Declaration's birthplace, would be the venue of a flaming stir, with cars burning along the Champs-Élysées, bringing life in the French capital to a stop. And that, as Emile Chabal has shown in these pages (Editorial page, *The Hindu*, December 6, 2018), provincial France and even France's Indian Ocean island of La Réunion would see sit-ins, blockades. Over what? Not something sporadic or transient or 'local' but over issues at the heart of the Universal Declaration: dignity, justice and equality.

The 'Yellow Vest' Paris riots which have shaken French President Emmanuel Macron's government are about much more than fuel price hikes, the immediate trigger. Following the stunning outburst, French Prime Minister Édouard Philippe announced a six-month reprieve from the hike, only to be rebuffed by the protesters as "too little, too late". Damien Abad, one of the youngest elected members of the European Parliament, said, "What we are asking of you Mr. Prime Minister, is not a postponement. It's a change of course."

If in the days preceding the 70th anniversary of the UDHR, Paris saw scalding fire, Delhi saw a scorching ire. An unprecedented rally, with tens of thousands of farmers, men and women from all parts of India, catalysed by the intrepid spokesmen for farmer and Dalit rights, Palagummi Sainath, and powered by kisan unions, converged in the national capital. They asked for farm loan waivers and for decent agricultural prices to be honoured. And then marching to Parliament, they demanded a session to discuss what has been a key concept in the UDHR: dignity. They asked that Parliament should discuss farmers' dignity threatened by the agrarian crisis in India which has led, from 1998 to 2018, to the suicides of some 300,000 farmers. Speaker after speaker at the rally spoke of agriculture being India's life, not just a feeder line.



GETTY IMAGES/STOCKPHOTO

The language used in Paris and Delhi has great similarities: business gets tax-cuts, agriculture gets diesel hikes. Factories get investment funds, farms do not even get minimum prices, affecting a human right described in Article 23 of the UDHR: "Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection."

Delhi's way

Even as leaders of almost all major Opposition parties joined the rally, Delhi's Aam Aadmi Party government led by Arvind Kejriwal bolstered it with moral and material support. Delhi, instead of being the target, became the very life, the soul, of the farmers' protest.

But Paris's flare and Delhi's glare notwithstanding, the Declaration is under severe strain, globally. Primarily because governments are, literally, laws unto themselves and also because the UDHR, though it has become part of the constitution and laws of several countries which attained independence after it was proclaimed, is not legally binding. It stirs a nation's conscience, not its laws. Law-makers and conscience-keepers coalesce but rarely. For most of the time, they are a species apart.

Curbs on dissenters can be seen around the globe, from China to Brazil, from India through Egypt and Turkey to the U.S. Myanmar which says 'no room' to its own Rohingya disregards Article 14, and Pakistan which hounds out

Asia Bibi disregards Article 18.

Terrorism mutilates that most fundamental human right – to life. It has done that in India. On UDHR70 we mourn terror's victims in Kashmir, among who are brave defence and security personnel on duty. But on UDHR70 we grieve no less for the pellet-blinded, the collaterally killed innocents of the Valley.

Torture, physical and mental, has been used through time and around the globe by states and non-state tyrants. India, no exception to the gross pattern, signed, during I.K. Gujral's prime ministership, the UN Convention Against Torture. But subsequent governments of India have refrained from ratifying it. Why? Do they think custodial torture is an inherent – read 'internal' – prerogative of statehood which the world has no business commenting on? Emotional pain and fear can be felt in a myriad ways. Group-isolating can be incredibly painful, frightening. The reported acquisition of land in Assam's Goalpara district for a 'detention camp' has been denied by the government, but the prospect brings to mind detention scenes from the world's history of ethnic ghetto-ing.

Human rights violations are not a 'state-gone berserk thing' alone. Society violates it in India with vigour. If the invoking of 'sedition' reflects state intolerance, what is one to say of the murder in cold blood of dissenters and whistleblowers? India bans in law but perpetuates in practice manual scavenging. It bans in law but lives with child marriage. It bans prenatal gender screening but is unable to stop it and that which follows, female foeticide.

Crimes against women, children in India seem unabating. We are in shame, unforgivable, unredeemable shame, to cite extreme examples, over the rape and murder of Nirbhaya in the national capital and of a child in Kashmir's Kathua district. If the Kathua murder had bigotry lurking over it, the beheading of a 13-year-old Dalit girl in Tamil Nadu's Salem district was laced with caste contempt.

A party at the crossroads

The BSP faces a situation in which it either emerges stronger nationally or loses significance beyond Uttar Pradesh



BADRI NARAYAN

The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) finds itself at a unique juncture that is important for the party and for democratic and contemporary politics. As a party, it has faced trials in the form of desertions, factionalism and turmoil. In the 2014 parliamentary elections, the BSP could not win even a single seat in its stronghold, Uttar Pradesh. Since then, it continues to face many pressures.

Right wing influences

Hindutva politics has begun to influence its base of voters. Dalit youth leaders, tapping into a new aggressive language being used against the dominant social groups, are emerging as a challenge to the party and its leader

Mayawati (picture) by trying to mobilise the Scheduled Castes (SCs). These younger leaders have emerged through social movements that have sprung up in reaction to atrocities against SCs. In its initial years, the BSP had used this kind of aggressive language. In a way, the use of language as a strong mobilisational tool for oppressed communities is a reminder of a similar instance in Maharashtra in the 1970s with the Dalit Panthers.

All these factors have led to the BSP facing a situation wherein it could emerge stronger or shrink further and lose its position as a political party of significance. Data show that the party's social base has shrunk to almost the level from which it began. Though the BSP remains a party of significance in terms of the vote share it recorded in the 2014 parliamentary elections and the U.P. Assembly elections in 2017 (around 22%), it has failed to maintain its strong position.

At the national level, an analysis



A.M. FARUQUI

of vote share data for the Lok Sabha polls between 2009 and 2014 shows that the party's nationwide vote share has declined from over 6% to 4.1%. So it needs a base expansion, which is why the party is trying hard to make a mark again not only in U.P. but also in other States. If it does make a mark in the Assembly elections now, it could become a significant factor in the politics of alliance formation in U.P. for the general election next year.

Perhaps Ms. Mayawati has recognised the importance of alliances. For example, in Karnataka, it formed an alliance with the Janata Dal (S), though its Minister quit the JD(S)-Congress coalition government recently. Based on

this model, it also tried to form an alliance with the Congress in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. In the last mentioned State, it eventually went into an alliance with Ajit Jogi's Janta Congress Chhattisgarh (J). The BSP's attempt to make these elections multipolar may fragment the anti-BJP votes and ultimately harm the prospects of the Congress. There are some in the BSP who subscribe to the line 'pahale hareng, phir harayenge' (first will face defeat and then will defeat others'), so the vote-cutting (vote *katawa*) construct may be a unique way in which the BSP is positioning itself in States where it is not a main contender.

In Madhya Pradesh, the BSP has influence in the Bundelkhand region, parts of Baghelkhand-Rewa, Satana division and the Bind-Morena areas of the Chambal region. In Chhattisgarh, the BSP and Mr. Jogi's party seem to be influential in the Bilaspur and Janjgir areas and in places adjoining the Maharashtra border. The combination

could also cut into votes in parts of these States where the Dalit-Bahujan communities are substantial in number and politically aware of Ambedkarite and Kanshiram-led Dalit-Bahujan politics.

If a mahagathbandhan, with say the Samajwadi Party, fails to emerge in U.P. in time for the general election, it could prove difficult to defeat the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Another poor showing in U.P. could result in deeper cracks in the BSP. Dissensions, desertions and inner conflict could become more open, with Ms. Mayawati losing her support base among the Dalit-Bahujan poor and the marginalised. Some could even gravitate towards the BJP and the Congress. So the BSP may be a puzzle for other political parties. One has to wait and watch how the BSP resolves these issues and creates a niche for itself.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Bulandshahr murder

The violence in Bulandshahr, Uttar Pradesh, where a police official on duty was shot dead, is yet another instance of the total breakdown of law and order in the State. With the evidence so far, is there an attempt to bury the truth? It is an accepted fact that in U.P., under the current dispensation, human lives are less precious when compared to cows.

C.V. ARAVIND,
Bengaluru

Surgical strikes

Lt. Gen. (retired) D.S. Hooda's remarks on the surgical strikes carried out by the Indian Army in 2016 have created needless controversy ("Modi politicised surgical strikes," December 9). The strikes did boost the morale of the Army and also reassured us of the abilities of our defence forces. The Centre

deserves praise for clearing this bold step. Has not the Congress taken claim for the successful liberation of East Pakistan in 1971? The bold and historic decision was successfully carried out by the Indian Army, which won Indira Gandhi wholesome praise. Who can forget the Congress winning the subsequent parliamentary elections with a thumping majority? The Narendra Modi government is not wrong in claiming its share of credit for the surgical strikes.

S.V. VENKATKRISHNAN,
Bengaluru

The surgical strikes were thoroughly politicised by the government not only in India but also abroad. Operations of security forces, especially in a sensitive zone, must be carried out with confidentiality. The hype over the strikes, as if they were resorted to for the first time, was misplaced. The

security situation in Jammu and Kashmir is still a matter of concern and the effect of the surgical strikes on terror is debatable. It is better to concentrate on the all-important task of maintaining peace and tranquillity along the Line of Control than brag about something done two years ago.

J. ANANTHA PADMANABHAN,
Tiruchir

'Engineless' train

There has been much media hype about the high speed train set called 'Train 18', manufactured by the Integral Coach Factory (ICF) Perambur, Tamil Nadu, being the first "engine-less" train in India. Trains without 'engines' (locomotives) have been in vogue in railways all over the world – this includes India – for decades, an example being the electric multiple units plying on the suburban sections of the metros. What, however,

is unique and praiseworthy about 'Train 18' is that it has been turned out in a record time of about 18 months, from conception to reality, with 'best in class' facilities. It is a wholly indigenous effort initiated by the field unit – in this case the ICF – unlike the usual top-down decisions thrust from the top, a feature that is common in government organisations. The credit should go Team ICF, from its top leadership down to the lowest levels – a rare success story in a public sector organisation. The train is also a shining example of 'Make in India'.

K. BALAKESARI,
Chennai

Fourth airport

The formal inauguration of Kannur international airport, on Sunday, an event which also gives Kerala its fourth international airport, may be lauded as welcome for the development of the north Kerala region. But it is

disheartening to note that the project has been built in a pristine region that is in close proximity to the ecologically sensitive Western Ghats. Is this an example of sustainable development undertaken by the government of a State which is bouncing back to normalcy after massive flooding caused by environmental degradation?

VJU JOSEPH M.,
Madathett, Kasaragod, Kerala

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In a story headlined "New Delhi cashes in on goodwill with UAE" (Dec. 8, 2018), CBI had been wrongly expanded as Central Bureau of Intelligence instead of Central Bureau of Investigation.

In the story headlined "Guidelines issued for homestays" (Dec. 8, 2018), the reference to *bread & breakfasts* in the opening paragraph should be corrected to read *bed & breakfasts*.

The headline of a report (Dec. 8, 2018) on the release of a special commemorative volume, *Service and Humanity*, was erroneous. It should have said: "Special volume released on Sharanra Basaveshwara shrine".

In a story relating to court warrant against Sasikala in FERA violation cases (Dec. 8, 2018, some editions), the headline and the text erroneously used that the warrant was to produce the jailed AI-ADMK leader in 13 cases. The correct headline is: "Court issues warrant to produce Sasikala on Dec. 13 in cases of FERA violation."

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